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ABSTRACT

Strategies are presented for fostering statewide program development and refinement in the field of special education. Sixteen observations about change are presented, with examples from various Washington statewide initiatives. Among the observations are the following: Reform should be promoted from within by empowering schools to explore alternatives, rather than calling upon outside authorities for solutions. Pilot programs can serve as effective models for demonstrating innovations. Fads and extremism do not take full advantage of prior experience and should be avoided in favor of gradual implementation of reforms stressing enhancement. Program development and refinement should be systematic and data-based, allowing for modifications learned through implementation. Strategies for change should be based at the building level and responsive to the principal. Reform should involve all stakeholders in the educational community. Clear communication of goals and timelines is necessary to avoid goal overburden and to minimize resistance to change. Staff development is an integral part of the planning and implementation of reform. Finally, it is important to safeguard the rights of handicapped children during the process of change. (JDD)

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FOSTERING SCHOOL REFORM AT THE ~~SCHOOL~~ STATE LEVEL

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FOSTERING SCHOOL REFORM AT THE STATE LEVEL

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Introduction

During the past 10-15 years, there have been dramatic changes in special education. The number of school-age handicapped children served in special education across the country has increased by more than 18%. Forty-two states mandate services for preschool handicapped children ages 3-5, compared to 25 when P.L. 94-142 was enacted. In addition, states are moving toward the development of comprehensive services for handicapped infants from birth to 2 years (P.L. 99-457). This program growth reflects not only increased services but also a common and universal understanding that handicapped students can learn and benefit from public education.

In addition to guaranteed access to educational opportunities for handicapped children and youth, states are focusing on a number of issues of quality; i.e., integration of services; transition programs; recruitment, training and retention of special education personnel; technology; early intervention; etc. Much change has and is occurring within the states to keep our special education programs and services dynamic, evolving and working toward the goal of a quality educational opportunity for all children and youth with handicaps.

Washington State has a history of commitment for students with special needs and has developed a number of statewide programs and services including Special Education, Chapter 1, a state-funded Learning Assistance Program to complement Chapter 1, bilingual programs, drug and alcohol prevention programs, child abuse prevention programs, gifted education, beginning teacher assistance program, etc. The State Department of Education (SEA) provides an important leadership and support role in the development, implementation and refinement of these programs.

This paper and the CEC session will focus on effective strategies to foster statewide program development and refinement. Sixteen observations about change will be discussed from the perspective of a state administrator of special education and other special programs, a teacher union leader and a parent/advocate leader. Examples from various Washington statewide initiatives will be provided to illustrate change observations.

Demographics of Washington State

Before looking at effective statewide change strategies, it may be helpful to provide selected demographic characteristics about Washington State in order to clarify the point of reference and perspectives of the writer and session presenters:

--Ranked 19th in total population with 4.34 million in 1984
--Has a school age population of 748,700 which ranks 19th in the nation
--Serves 75,879 handicapped children in special education or 9.7% of the school-age population

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--Ranks 19th in per capita income (1984)
--Is one of 5 states without a personal or corporate income tax
--Ranks 20th in % of revenue from the state for K-12 educational programs and 46th in local taxes as a % of state/local taxes for K-12
--Ranks 20th in revenue per pupil in average daily attendance and 19th in current expenditures per student in average daily membership
--Ranks 5th from the highest in number of students enrolled per teacher and 2nd from the highest in students per teacher in average daily membership
--Ranks 15th in average teacher salaries (1985-86)
--Ranks 47th in % of salary increase from 1975 to 1985--and 51% in percent of salary increase from 1984-85 to 1985-86
--20% of Washington children are raised in poverty
--Rate of juvenile arrests for violent crimes more than doubled from 1981 to 1988
--1/5 of 14 to 17 year olds have alcohol problems

Observations About Change

1. **Program development and refinements in special education should take place within the overall context of educational reform--a part of rather than a part from changes in the total educational delivery system.**

The call for school reform is not new. American history is full of reform efforts from colonial America to the present. John Goodlad has said that educational reform occurs about every twenty years. Schools are taken for granted in good times and often blamed for the bad times. Schools have periodically been called upon to deal with economic and social crises or conditions. For example, many hoped the schools would help solve economic problems in the Depression and 20 years later would strengthen national defense after Sputnick. Today, there are national social and economic forces which are re-shaping national and global economies and which are placing reform demands on the schools.

First, the United States industry has been losing ground in an increasingly competitive global economy. If the U.S. is to remain viable in the international market place, the skills of our work force will have to be improved. New models for vocational education will be needed. Systematic transition efforts for the handicapped and at-risk youth must go beyond pilot efforts and be "internalized" within each state's infrastructure of education. More than three quarters of our American work force in the year 2000 will be adults. Between 20% and 40% of our current adult work force are functionally or marginally illiterate. Approximately half of the work force will need re-training and re-education every 5 to 7 years in order to remain competitive in current jobs or to make career changes. The schools will need to participate in life-long learning and offer re-training programs for adults in job transition.

Closely related is increased diversity in our society. The children entering the schools will be an increasing challenge because of their social, economic, linguistic and social diversity. Harold Hodgkinson (1987) and other demographers have written extensively about the characteristics of today's five-year olds:

1. Twenty-four percent live below the poverty line. Forty percent of the poor are children.

2. More than one-third belong to minority groups. This figure is projected to increase to 40 percent by the year 2000.

3. There is an increased number of dialects and languages spoken by students in our schools.

4. Eighteen percent were born outside of marriage.

5. About half will live with a single parent. Families with a working father, housewife mother and two or more school-aged children make up 4% of American households.

6. About 10-11% have physical or emotional handicaps.

7. Twenty percent of the females will become pregnant in their teens. Every day, 40 teenagers give birth to their first child.

8. Two thirds of their mothers will be working by the time they reach high school. Latch key children now 7% will become the majority.

Taken from Hodgkinson, Harold, **Changing Society, Unchanging Curriculum**, Phi Kappa Phi Journal, Summer, 1987.

These social and economic forces stimulated a **Nation at Risk** and a number of subsequent excellence in education reports and a resulting national debate across the country regarding school reform. After these reports were released, forty-three states raised high school graduation requirements; thirty-seven states implemented specific measures to enhance student achievement; thirty seven states raised teacher certification requirements (including teacher competency tests) and 300 state-level education study groups adopted key national report recommendations. Other state initiatives have included early childhood education programs, dropout prevention programs, drug and alcohol prevention programs, child abuse prevention programs, AIDS education and prevention programs, reduction of class size, etc.

It is essential that program development and refinement in special education take place within the context of overall educational reform. Coordination across all categorical programs and general education must be emphasized. Classroom teachers are being asked to carry out various educational reform measures as well as non-traditional social and health service functions. These additional responsibilities and the complex student diversity must be recognized when special education or other educational program refinement is proposed.

The Washington SEA has been providing technical assistance and funding resources to school districts to encourage collaborative planning between special education, other categorical programs and general education. In recognition of the need to utilize a whole child approach and the need to develop coordinated planning and an integrated service delivery system, four major state agencies (including the SEA) have entered into a recent interagency agreement.

2. Change should not be mandated--schools must be empowered to explore alternative strategies or innovative programs.

During the past 10-15 years, a number of excellent programs and services have been developed within the schools for students with special needs as well as for the broader student population. The categorical nature of each of these programs with its own set of rules and regulations, funding patterns, organizational structures, population served and service delivery parameters often precludes a mindset of innovation and flexibility.

Traditional models of school improvement or school reform have assumed that knowledge comes from experts, and can be handed to practioners to implement. Schools are seen as places in need of repair rather than centers that can be changed by the process of critical inquiry. Several efforts in Washington State are designed to encourage and promote such inquiry. We think an important role of the SEA, State Board of Education, the legislature and state professional organizations is to encourage innovation, refinement, efficiency and enhancement of the existing service delivery for students with special needs as well as the broader student population. For example, the Legislature passed self study provisions to allow for school renewal, goal setting and community involvement. The Washington Association of School Administrators is supporting school district strategic planning efforts.

During the 1987 legislative session, the Washington Legislature enacted a Schools for the Twenty-First Century Pilot Program designed to foster change in the state common school system. The purpose of this program is to determine whether increased local decision-making authority will produce more effective learning. Twenty schools and one school district have been selected to participate in this six-year program and are provided rule and regulation waivers and funding to facilitate and allow for innovation and change.

The SEA, in cooperation with the Association of Washington School Principals, is also carrying out several projects to allow for and encourage the development of building-based alternative services for students with mild learning problems (See Appendix A).

3. Lighthouse pilot or model demonstration programs should be developed and supported

An important role of the Washington SEA is to provide funding and other support for "lighthouse" or pilot demonstration programs. Such demonstration programs are important in that they provide important information about successful practices. In addition, they foster a climate of innovation and experience.

There are many Washington examples of model program development. For example, each spring, the SEA funds a number of statewide innovative special education projects in areas that are jointly determined by the SEA and the field. The purpose of this grant competition is to explore issues of special education program quality such as recruitment and retention of special education personnel, staff development, rural service delivery, services for seriously behaviorally disabled students, integration, transition and prevention/early intervention.

Appendix B provides a summary of a number of transition efforts that have been supported or carried out by the SEA. Several state agencies (including the SEA) are also participating in a 5-year partnership between business and employers to increase employment opportunities for Washington's most severely disabled citizens. Demonstration projects have been funded in order to carry out the Initiative's goal of generating 1,000 new jobs by 1990 for people with mental retardation, cerebral palsy and related severe disabilities.

4. Change should not be faddish and inclined to swing the pendulum from one extreme to another.

In considering program change and refinement in education, we often "overreact" and are inclined to throw out old ideas rather than focusing on enhancement. Fads often masquerade as progress. Effective change builds on prior experience.

The Regular Education Initiative at the federal level encourages new models of service delivery for mildly handicapped students and challenges traditional pull-out programs. The national debate in this area tends to be faddish and inclined to throw the "baby out with the bath". Explorations in Washington State are focusing on the entire continuum of options. We feel that pull-out programs are important for many handicapped students and are attempting to better coordinate these special programs with general education. In addition, we are also exploring a number of instructional and organizational strategies which emphasize in-classroom intervention. Our goal is to extend, enhance and better coordinate the full continuum of programs and services.

5. Change takes time--sufficient time should be allowed for planning, implementation, evaluation and internalization.

6. Program development and refinement should be systematic and data based allowing for modifications learned through implementation

The above two observations stress the need for sufficient time to explore program refinement strategies. There is no "quick fix". Sustained school change is often a long-term process of planning, implementation, evaluation and internalization within the state or school district infrastructure. Program development and refinement must be based on systematic planning and implementation with data collected using appropriate impact measures (such as student achievement, student social adjustment, staff satisfaction and parent satisfaction). It is important to remember that current problems are often "yesterday's solutions to yesterday's problems". Data-based change strategies are important allowing mid-course correction as needed.

Appendix B and C provide two examples of systematic planning efforts of the Washington SEA. Transition efforts have had several exploration phases including implementation of model programs, interagency planning of supported employment options, state plan development, policy revision related to Individualized Transition Planning, etc. A second summary is provided within Appendix C which details a number of special studies designed to explore alternative service delivery for low performing students. The Washington Birth to Six State Planning Project is another example of a systematic effort to develop a broad-based (interagency) and careful foundation for statewide programs and services for infants and toddlers who are disabled or at risk and for their families.

The Washington SEA is currently carrying out a special education personnel study of the existing and future recruitment, training and retention needs. Study findings will lead to the implementation of systematic, data based strategies designed to anticipate current and future special education personnel needs.

Appendix C provides information regarding Project MERGE which is a systematic planning efforts in the Olympia School District. Developed over a five year period, this program is designed to increase the collaboration between general and regular education and to explore a "within classroom" approach to service delivery for students with mild learning problems.

7. **Program refinements should be building based--led by the building principal involving those who will implement the change, as well as those who will be impacted by the change.**

8. **A single change model should not be imposed--rather tailor-made, building based change strategies should be encouraged and facilitated.**

The above observations relate to an important philosophy within Washington State that the principal is the instructional leader of the building and must lead special education as well as other program refinements in coordination with school district program managers. We believe that every building is different; therefore, a single change model should not be imposed. Rather, the state should clearly communicate minimum program parameters allowing each building to develop program refinement strategies that are tailor-made and "fit" the style, capability and interests of the staff; the educational needs of the students; and the preferences and values of the parents and the community.

Appendix A describes two cooperative projects between the Washington SEA and the Association of Washington School Principals designed to add to the body of knowledge regarding the use of alternative instructional and organizational strategies for students with mild learning problems.

The SEA is also working closely with the Association of Washington School Principals in the development of building-based strategies to better integrate handicapped and non-handicapped preschool age children.

9. **Program development and refinement must be broad based and involve all stakeholders in the educational community.**

Consensus and ownership are key elements to successful change. If a program suggested or mandated by the state is seen as an "add on" and no effort is made to build ownership, real change will not occur. The best change involves meshing policy and grassroots, rather than unidirectional action. Involvement of the stakeholders is important at the state and local level in order to effect statewide change. "We own that which we create". Without a participatory decision making and consensus building planning process, the resulting policy or initiative will not fit those who will implement or those who will be impacted. The change process is often not "institutionalized" within the educational infrastructure because a gap exists between policy expectations and district, school or community expectations. Washington State utilizes a consensus building approach to policy development and program or initiative planning and implementation in the area of special education. The SEA frequently convenes field groups to problem solve special education issues, react to policy directions and options, and formulate the parameters of new initiatives, programs and studies/research.

During the 1987 session, the legislature passed a bill to require the SEA to explore the feasibility of curriculum based assessment in early screening, eligibility determination and on-going curriculum planning. An oversight committee has assisted the SEA in the planning of various studies. This committee will review the data collected and help make recommendations to the legislature.

An oversight committee will also be formed this spring to develop state guidelines regarding the use of aversive therapy techniques. A statewide Transition Plan has been developed by a broad-based group and submitted to the 1989 legislature for future policy and funding action. Committees of statewide stakeholders are also involved in special education personnel recruitment, training and retention efforts, funding system changes, enhanced integration of severely handicapped students in the community and the planning of services for troubled deaf youth and other seriously emotionally disturbed children and youth.

10. Program change should not be done within the context of negative rhetoric, but rather on program improvement and enhancement.

A negative "spin-off" of the educational reform movement is that the schools have been attacked from all sides and blamed for the "economic and social ills". The federal Regular Education Initiative has also promoted an extensive national debate regarding changes needed in the traditional special education service delivery system. This Initiative has lacked clarity and substance resulting in a number of misunderstandings and growing negative rhetoric. Sustained change is more likely to occur if it is communicated from a positive rather than a negative base. We believe the issue is not whether the current system is broken, but rather on ways to adapt the system for changing populations, new technology, research findings, parent and community input, and program experience.

11. Clear communication is necessary prior to and during the early stages of change.

12. In planning for change, it is important not to overestimate the merits of change and minimize the demands and potential resistance of new practices.

The change literature describes the first six months of a change process as a period of high anxiety and confusion. Clear communication of the goals, activities and timelines are necessary when implementing school reform. Change efforts inevitably result in goal overburden since new activities often compete with existing demands. Those persons instituting or being impacted by the change must know what is being changed and why. In the absence of information, something always fills the gap. Clear communication minimizes filling the gap with misinformation and anxiety.

13. Program "blunting" results in lower study impact; therefore, high levels of implementation should occur.

Users must tailor innovations to match state, district or building characteristics. A challenge for the principal in altering innovation is to distinguish between changes which improve the original design or which water down the innovation. Huberman and Miles (1984) studied a number of innovations intended to improve student performance. They found that higher impact on student performance was achieved where high levels of implementation were attained. Sacrificing the program design by taking out demanding and ambitious components can lead to less desirable results.

14. Staff development is an integral part of the planning and implementation of program development and refinement.

15. The amount and quality of ongoing technical assistance, support and networking is critical to the success of large scale innovation.

Huberman and Miles (1984) reported that schools receiving more technical assistance in the implementation of new programs and existing program refinement were more effective in creating change. Implementing new expectations and demands is not easy and requires sufficient assistance. Principals participating in Washington model projects report the need for ongoing networking with other principals implementing similar change strategies. Effective change agents are resourceful (Dwyer, 1985). They are adept at seeking out and getting resources to facilitate and support implementation of change strategies. It is critical that sufficient staff development be provided in that school reform brings on new expectations, new delivery strategies and/or changing populations of students to serve.

16. It is important to safeguard the rights of handicapped children during the process of change.

Washington State is eager to innovate, refine and improve our programs and services for handicapped children. We feel strongly, however, that during program exploration, it is critical to safeguard the rights of handicapped children. We must also guard our existing resources while exploring new or alternative ways to deliver programs and services.

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